

A Different Kind of Hero

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Australia Day is an invitation to celebrate heroes – those extraordinary people who together made possible our large and successful society.

At Australia Day breakfasts across this nation, speakers right now will be describing the people they believe matter in our national story – the famous, the notorious, the quietly achieving.

I too have some heroes I come to praise this morning, unlikely candidates who get little recognition for their contribution – indeed people who find themselves regularly pilloried in public discussion, despite their importance in our Australian story.

Before starting, though, please let me thank those who kindly asked me to speak today – above all Alan Castleman, Chair of Australian Unity, a company with its origins in the Australian Natives' Association, and so with proud historical connections back into the nineteenth century.

Organisations such as the Australian Natives' Association helped create modern Australia, by campaigning hard for federation and for the establishment of Australia Day.

Less often mentioned is the significant contribution of the Association to school, vocational and university education across the country.

And on this Australia Day, it is a singular pleasure to speak on a morning when the Honours list includes my wife, Professor Margaret Gardner, made an Officer in the Order of Australia for her services to scholarship, education and industrial relations.

Any speaker on Australia Day must begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

The lives of Indigenous Australians were profoundly and irrevocably altered when the first fleet arrived in Botany Bay on 18 January 1788,

only to discover it offered no protected anchorage, no fertile grasslands, no fresh water.

As Robert Hughes records in *The Fatal Shore*, crowds of Aborigines gathered around the Bay, waving spears and shouting ‘warra warra’, or ‘go away’.

Two hundred and nineteen years later, a meaningful partnership between we new arrivals and the first Australians is yet to be accomplished. It remains pressing business for us all. So in acknowledging the traditional owners I know, like everyone in this great gathering, that more than words is required.

With Botany Bay unpromising, on 26 January Captain Arthur Phillip sailed north to Port Jackson, where he found, as he famously said in a letter to Lord Sydney, ‘... the finest harbour in the world, in which a thousand sail of the line may ride with the most perfect security’.

With just 11 ships and around 1,350 people under his protection, Captain Phillip waded ashore at a place he named Sydney Cove, to establish the first British colony in Australia.

It is that act, and all that followed – settlement, expansion across the mountains, gold rushes and droughts, the federation of colonies into a nation, prosperity, depression, war, peace and the prospect of reconciliation – we celebrate today.

And though the symbols of Australia Day often suggest otherwise, with soldiers and sports stars to the fore, it is in fact a political triumph we celebrate.

By slow degrees a collection of colonies became a self-governing nation. Those who came before created in this place a democracy that welcomed others to its shores, that awarded each citizen the right to vote in open and free elections, that committed to equality of treatment before the law, that respected privacy so we can each live the life we value.

It sounds odd to suggest that Australia Day should be about celebrating a political settlement, but it remains our greatest achievement.

The problem of how to live together has eluded many through history. Discord and civil strife have defined – and ended – so many lives.

Indeed the great subject matter of political philosophy has been this fundamental question of how people with different beliefs and goals can avoid tearing each other apart.

Plato recommended an absolute monarch, a philosopher-king, to keep men in check. Thomas Hobbes too believed a powerful central authority was essential to prevent life becoming 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

In his monumental history of the decline and fall of Rome, Edward Gibbon concluded that the inability of the Romans to agree on an acceptable form of government fatally weakened, and so made vulnerable, the Empire.

As today we welcome refugees from civil war in the Sudan and elsewhere, we recall again our great fortune in finding a way of governing ourselves that makes Australia, in every sense, a civil society.

A democracy works when it becomes habit, the daily and unexamined routine of us all. When values we profess in public speeches – respect, equity, a fair go – are echoed in private discussion.

Democracy rests on mutual respect and self-restraint, learned early and ingrained through long practice.

So we celebrate Australia Day not because we are special, or chosen, or green and gold, or even because we are diverse and multicultural.

What we celebrate, simply but profoundly, is that Australians have created a society in which each citizen can live a rich and meaningful life.

Faced with the ancient question 'how should we govern ourselves?' we've found our answer – not perfect, not always living up to our aspirations, but the foundation nonetheless for a working representative democracy.

It is a system of self-government reinforced by our legal and political institutions, reflected in the political passions of our citizens, accepted as legitimate by the networks of public associations, private companies, voluntary organisations and family, ethnic and religious groups that make up Australian society.

Democracy is underpinned by assumptions we take for granted – that, for example, every Australian can read and write and so participate in public life.

Our political system presumes, without much examination, that Australians understand the purpose and operation of democracy, the value of free expression, the importance of the rule of law, the intrinsic rights of every person.

There was a time, of course, when such assumptions could not be made – when education and literacy were not universal, when essential civic knowledge might not be absorbed at school, to be carried through life.

We had to learn how to live together in peace, and we did so in large part through education.

The first Australian schools appeared soon after settlement in Sydney, supervised by chaplains. They relied on five convicts assigned to teach. No government funds were offered to support education, suggesting the reach of such schools was probably erratic and incomplete.

Attempts at reform in the early nineteenth century founded on the question of who should run education – state or church. A compromise in the *National Education Board Act* of 1848 established two school systems in New South Wales – one denominational and the other government-run, setting a pattern still familiar across Australia. Education though remained voluntary, determined in many cases by the economic circumstances of parents.

It was here in Victoria that reformers first pressed the case that a democracy requires education for all. A visionary Premier - James Goodall Francis, Chief Secretary of Victoria from June 1872 to July 1874 – pushed through the necessary law.

A businessman, Francis represented Richmond in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. A moderate in a sometimes bitterly divided Parliament, Francis held together a ministry for two years with a program of often innovative legislation.

In 1872 he proposed, and saw passed, the *Victorian Education Act*, the first in the world to set up a centralised public school system based on the principles of free, secular and compulsory education. With this legislation, ahead of similar moves elsewhere in Australia, Britain,

Canada and the United States, the colony of Victoria created government schools that would educate all children for their future lives.

The philosophy underpinning the *Education Act* was simple and clear. Victorian children would attend school because literacy and numeracy matter for a productive life but, even more, because self-government requires educated citizens who can understand, analyse and participate in public life. Schools would become the cradle of citizenship.

The Victorian lead was followed over the next twenty years across Australia. By the time of the federation debates in the 1890s, almost every Australian child could read and write, knew something of the history of this continent, and could bring an informed and independent mind to the great issue of nationhood.

In the years following federation, a further wave of educational reform improved the quality of schools and teacher training.

Here in Victoria, the extraordinary work of Frank Tate, a teacher at Box Hill and then inspector for the Mallee district, exemplified the commitment to improve education. Tate introduced new teaching methods then gaining popularity in Britain. He encouraged debate about teaching within unions and professional societies, and through the pages of *The Age*.

Eventually appointed Director of Education for Victoria, Tate applied his considerable energy to reforming school administration, expanding the network of secondary schools and encouraging professional training for teachers. He forced a reluctant University of Melbourne to introduce the state's first diploma of teaching.

Other eminent Victorians made important contributions to ensuring the educated population we now take for granted.

Charles Pearson, for example, the first Headmaster of Presbyterian Ladies College, believed that girls should have access to an education at least equivalent to boys, and worked hard to make this possible.

Pearson's inaugural professorial lecture in 1875, entitled 'The Higher Culture of Women' argued the case for women to be admitted not just to secondary schooling but to university – a viewpoint resisted by Victoria's only university until 1880, when women were admitted to all degrees

except medicine. Today, women outnumber men in school completion and university participation - including medical courses.

A similar concern to create an educated population able to take on the rigours of self-government inspired one of the greatest acts of philanthropy in colonial Victoria, when Francis Ormond donated a considerable part of his fortune to create the Workingman's College in 1887, the foundation of the modern RMIT.

But paying attention just to the education leaders can overlook the most essential element of a successful education system – great teachers.

The great examples of how schools help create an educated and informed citizenry are not confined to the distant past. School teachers remain the unacknowledged legislators of every generation.

Take, for example, the work of Debney Park Secondary College in equipping a new generation for citizenship.

This small and unassuming College sits near Flemington in the Melbourne suburbs, under the leadership of Brett New for many years, and now with Michael O'Brien as the inspiring school principal. Over the gate is the school motto – 'Towards Equity and Excellence - Every Child Matters'.

The Debney Park catchment area includes large communities of Somali and Sudanese refugees. Many are very recent arrivals. Margaret Simons (2006) reports that 'in their home country most had been semi-nomadic peasants'. There are some 43 different nationalities among the school's 340 students. 'Some arrived without ever having held a pen or handled a book'. More than half live in public housing, and some children arrive at the school suffering post-traumatic shock.

'And yet', notes Simons, 'almost beyond belief' the school consistently sees about a quarter of its VCE students achieving ENTER scores above 80. In the most recent VCE round, more than 10 percent of Debney Park Secondary College students earned ENTER scores over 90.

A 2005 Victorian Department of Education On Track survey of Debney Park graduates a year after completing school found that 96 percent had gone onto tertiary education or training. The remainder were in employment or apprenticeships. None was unemployed.

Though data from 2006 were not as positive, the school continues to post exceptional results.

Debney Park Secondary College is an example of a small and disadvantaged school that inspires its students to learn. The school is not afraid to look outward for support and advice – to other local schools, to business organisations such as the Boston Consulting Group, and to the Faculty of Education and the Victorian College of the Arts at the University of Melbourne.

This year, the College hopes to launch an international exchange program, again encouraging its pupils to look beyond their immediate circumstances to the possibilities beyond the school gate.

The strong performance of Debney Park graduates once they reach university is testament to their excellent schooling and to their impressive determination to overcome personal and social obstacles.

This small example – one of many from our education system - shows that with imagination, hard work and community support, a school can make a huge difference to those it serves. Refugees from societies that have fallen into traumatic civil war find calm, opportunity and encouragement in one of those free, secular and compulsory schools bequeathed to Victoria more than a century ago.

Every student at Debney Park Secondary College has an individual learning program. The school runs extra literacy programs. It has constructed a soundhouse to promote student learning, engagement and wellbeing. Parents are closely involved through the Debney Advisory Group. The teachers are talented and committed. They have created, with their pupils, a culture of learning.

As Principal Michael O'Brien says, 'It is simply the best environment to work in. The most wonderful job you could ever have'.

As reporter Margaret Simons wandered through the school, she observed African boys playing, the variety of headscarves worn by the girls, the defiant but impeccably polite graffiti. She sat in on a Year 10 class learning about the Australian political system:

They know who the Prime Minister is. They are less clear on the leader of the Opposition. Is it Mark Latham, one asks, 'the man who wrote the book'? They know about Steve Bracks, the Premier

of Victoria, because he is Lebanese. One student carries on about this so much that the teacher jokes with him that he must want to be Lebanese.

‘No, Miss’, he replies. ‘I want to be white’.

The year 11 class includes three students who are fasting for Ramadan as they study, by their own choice, *10 Things I Hate About You*, a modern retelling of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. The students dissect the morals underpinning this high school movie about the perils of dating, in which everyone is beautiful, smart, middle class and very white. They identify the values promoted by the American film makers, but draw their own, different, conclusions.

The work of Michael O’Brien and his team at Debney Park shows that the work of education in support of citizenship continues today in Australia.

School teaching is often thankless work, noticed at best in the classroom and by parents. Yet Debney Park Secondary College, like public and private schools across this State and nation, quietly builds our democracy. Schools ensure the latest arrivals to this nation can share the inheritance, understand the values, and be part of shaping the future.

So here is my modest Australia Day proposal: when we next talk about nation builders, about famous sports stars, successful entrepreneurs, leading politicians, let’s recall who does the work, every day, to sustain the foundations of democratic Australia.

You would not guess that contribution from public discussion. School teachers are routinely criticised rather than praised when education is discussed.

Australians apparently little value the dedication and the contribution of school teachers. We are unlikely to contemplate a National Teachers Day, as happens through much of Asia, when adults take a flower to the teacher at school or university who most inspired them.

Instead, school teachers get attacked all the time – by politicians, by newspaper columnists, by people who should know better.

As Professor Sue Willis, President of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, observed just last week, the current sport of bagging teachers will see fewer young people make teaching their career of choice.

‘The capacity to attract our brightest and best young people into teaching ... is directly related to the way (the profession) is constructed both in the media and by politicians’ Professor Willis told the *Sunday Age* (Hagan 2000).

‘It’s absolutely clear that we have downturns in application rates (for university courses) and an increased loss of teachers from the profession, when they are constantly being slammed’.

‘... If we really want to attract the brightest and best into state schools’, she concluded, ‘we’ve got to start talking them up’.

She’s right. Teachers get blamed for problems in the education system more properly sheeted home to poor rates of pay, lack of equipment and inadequate facilities. We characterise teachers as unionised ratbags rather than as a profession like lawyers or doctors.

Our kindergarten teachers are often the first great formative influence beyond the family. School is usually our first experience of working with a group of strangers around shared goals, of living alongside difference. School gives us a glimpse of something bigger than ourselves and our immediate circle.

These early lessons make it possible to live together as adults. Research by Jan Pakulski and Bruce Tranter (2000) demonstrates a clear correlation between levels of education and civic identity as an Australian.

‘Aussie values’ are not innate. We learn them, along with multiplication tables and critical reasoning.

So next time a public speaker takes a cheap shot at school teachers, reflect for a moment on just how much our political system, our way of associating, our peaceful streets and national consensus about the norms of public life, are learned from teachers like those today at Debney Park Secondary College.

And when next reminded how some of our poorest schools struggle to cover costs, recall just how fundamental their work is to our way of life. As the motto says, Every Child Matters.

Democracies are fragile. They endure only when the rules about living together are understood and accepted.

We learn those rules from our families and those who do the essential but unrecognised work of fostering democracy from the ground up – our teachers.

The value of education is more than skills learned and employability. Great teaching changes lives. It sees the potential in students, respects their ability, inspires a passion for learning, provides the young with a trustworthy setting in which to set aside personal fears. In the words of Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game (2006:xiv-xv), great teaching is an invitation to open the mind, the introduction to a ‘full life’.

Teaching is the preparation of the next generation to take on the burden of self-government. Through education we transmit, to those who will follow, the knowledge, the virtues, the values necessary to preserve and carry forward our democratic society.

It is patient teachers, and willing students, who together will turn the 43 nationalities at Debney Park into great Australians – just as they have all we migrants who went before.

Teachers are, for me, the heroes of this and every Australia Day.

They need our support – moral and practical.

For in the words of Harvard President Derek Bok, ‘if you think education is expensive, try ignorance’.

Acknowledgements

With thanks for assistance and comments to Neville Buch, Margaret Gardner, Larry Kamener, Andrew Norton, Michael O'Brien, John Polesel and Field Rickards.

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